

breaking the world speed record in the tailless DH-108 when it exploded over the Thames estuary. The man who started out as his workshop assistant rose to a prominent position in the company whose management has been characterized by a close team as well as a tight familial organization. Yet nepotism is strongly, and apparently successfully, denied. Perhaps the great contribution of this book is to reveal the personality of a highly successful businessmen to whom money has meant little.

ROBIN HIGHAM *

My Father Marconi. By Degna Marconi. New York, Toronto, London: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1962. Pp. x, 320. \$7.50.

There is no inherent reason why a biography by a famous man's daughter should not be interesting and illuminating. One expects a partisan treatment (or it would be a strange daughter), but this type of biography gives promise of a more intimate view of someone who has always been treated like a public figure. I don't mean that I expect the "inside" story but at least some understanding of the character of a man who achieved so much. There are some flashes of insight in this biography of Marconi by his oldest daughter, but they are much too few.

The first sentence of the book, without meaning to, points up the handicap which the author worked under. She wrote that she was born 13 years after Marconi's historic discovery. As a result, over half of the book, which deals with Marconi's early life and his success, was obtained from other biographies, letters in answer to the author's inquiries, and some reminiscences of Marconi's friends whom the author knew. The book therefore is not a personal record of the daughter, but the daughter merely doing what any biographer might have done. The latter part of the book does reveal something about the man, Marconi. With hardly any effort to color the story, the author, with considerable frankness, tells of Marconi's marital troubles, some of his personal shortcomings, among which seems to have been a short temper, and undue worries about money.

What did I specifically expect from his biography? Something of the motives of the man. But the author tells us, "My father was, on the whole, inarticulate about his motives. . . ." Nothing very much

* Currently on leave from the University of North Carolina, Dr. Higham is serving as historian of the British Overseas Airways Corporation. He is the author of *Britain's Imperial Air Routes, 1918-1939*; *The British Rigid Airship, 1908-1931*, *A Study in Weapons Policy*; and *Armed Forces in Peacetime, Britain 1918-1939*, which is scheduled for publication this year.

could be done about that then. What of his character? The daughter's view which we get throughout the book, necessarily, is one thing, and she makes an attempt to get expressions from others. Here again, I am afraid that the result is inadequate. One woman who saw Marconi when she was a girl "paints a picture of someone young and simple and friendly." This is something that could have been said about millions of young men and therefore does nothing to set Marconi apart. There are some brief flashes, but the author doesn't alert the reader; he has to be on the watch himself. For instance, Marconi wrote a letter to his wife saying that he wished his boy would go to naval officers' school because ". . . I am much more in touch and sympathy with Naval officers than with university professors!" Everyone is entitled to his own taste in companions, but this confession tells us much about the man and his times. There is more told inadvertently in this biography than is said by intent, but the reader has reason to expect more than that.

The fact is that this biography is modeled after most of the biographies we have of famous scientists and technologists. The great mass of these biographies are no more than collection of anecdotes told by friends, usually associates in the field, who are ill-equipped to give insights into character. They are interested in things and not men. I don't mean that they are unfeeling, but their training and their work have not prepared these people to give any kind of useful character analysis. They were asked for their views of the man because they had the good fortune to know him and perhaps work with him. That is worth something, but when the biography relies solely on this type of source it cannot rise very high.

For the most part, these anecdotes are told to amuse and to convince the reader that the "great" man was indeed human and that he had many of the same foibles as you and I. We are given an account of the discovery and sometimes a technical evaluation of its worth. But anecdotes can tell nothing about how the man made the discovery, why he became interested in his study, or what there was in his character and approach which produced success.

Do I expect too much from biography? Examples outside of the field of technology show us that we should expect much more. "Honest Abe" Lincoln is the subject of much anecdotal history, but we also have some excellent biographies of him. The reason the man shows through the myth is that biographers have set out to do just that: separate the two.

The task is not easy. In the case of Lincoln, contemporaneous sources of his early days come from lawyers (who are "people-oriented"), but these suffer from being accounts after the fact. Few, including Lincoln, anticipated his rise to greatness, and one would not expect his early acquaintances to be noting his actions carefully. The same could be said for Faraday, Maxwell, or Bell.

The excellence of many biographies of non-technical men is due first to the objective in mind. The good ones are written by historians or professional biographers who are digging for more than amusing and "human interest" stories. Their object is to increase knowledge of the man so that the reader can understand why he acted as he did. One can't expect a complete psychoanalysis of the subject after he is dead, but the reader has every right to expect an illumination of the man and his times. No biography is justified simply because the man was famous.

I have said that biographies of technical men suffer from having as their main source of information other technical men whose competence to analyze character may be limited. Unfortunately, the writers also are usually technical men who sadly misjudge the purpose of biography. Given these dual handicaps, can we expect anything better? I think that is the crux of the question. We have not been expecting enough from these biographies and therefore should not be surprised with the results. The first step is to raise the expectations. More people should be encouraged to begin serious "biography" of scientists and technicians, not just anecdotal mishmash or a mere recital of technical achievements.

At least with this view in mind, a search of the sources would produce more than most of these technological biographers have chosen to use. It can be done. Koestler's controversial book, *The Sleepwalkers*, does much the kind of thing I have been talking about. Matthew Josephson's book on Edison is another, and there are certainly more.

The way to "humanize" technology is not to tell homilies about the technologists. We must know more about the great men of science and technology. The object is not amusement, although the biographies cannot help being interesting; instead, the object is understanding of the world, which was changed because of these men.

HAROLD I. SHARLIN *

* Associate Professor at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, Dr. Sharlin is spending the current academic year as Visiting Professor of the History of Science at Iowa State University (Ames). His book, *The Making of the Electrical Age*, is scheduled for publication this year.